



Testimony in support of H.B. 5397 – An Act Declaring Gun Violence a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Office of Gun Violence Prevention and Advisory Council on Gun Violence Prevention and Intervention and S.B. 477 – An Act Concerning the Public Health of Residents of the State.

Hello, my name is Jacquelyn Santiago Nazario; I am the CEO of COMPASS Youth Collaborative, a nonprofit agency that works with high-risk youth in the City of Hartford. At COMPASS, we develop transformative relations with the youth we serve; we provide them with the support and opportunities they need to become successful in education, employment, and life.

I am here to voice COMPASS's support of H.B. 5397 – An Act Declaring Gun Violence a Public Health Crisis and Establishing the Office of Gun Violence Prevention and Advisory Council on Gun Violence Prevention and Intervention and S.B. 477 – An Act Concerning the Public Health of Residents of the State.

Gun violence meets the definition of a disease; it is contagious; it spreads from person to person. Victims of gun violence are 59% more likely to become drivers of violence.

Like other contagious and epidemic health problems, gun violence deserves treatment, and it deserves to be studied in a public health context. H.B 5397 and S.B. 477 would fund data collection and study of gun violence and support evidence-informed, community-based programs and strategies to reduce gun violence.

Today I am thinking of Taki, one of the young men COMPASS serves. At 20, Taki says he "has lost as many people to gun violence as years he has been alive." Imagine being 20 years old and losing 20 people to gun violence.

89% of the youth we serve have experienced the death of a family member or close friend due to gun violence.

2021 was Hartford's deadliest year in decades, and in March of 2022, we are already ahead of March 2021 numbers.

But gun violence isn't just a body count. The trauma caused by gun violence doesn't just affect the victims; it also affects their friends, family members, neighbors, and community.

When Taki first began working with COMPASS, he was disconnected from any positive role models; he had stopped going to school and had no visions of a future.

Working closely with COMPASS's Director of Peacebuilders, Dean Jones, Taki has begun to understand his trauma and how it impacts his life. COMPASS gave him a safe space where he could have moments of feeling free from harm. COMPASS also gave him the tools he needs to become successful at securing employment.

It hasn't been easy, Taki; it's never a straight line for our youth. But at COMPASS, we plan for the setbacks and use them as teaching moments.

Taki has taken the Security Guard Certification course and will have his "Guard Card" next month. He will be able to contribute financially to his family and be a role model to others in the community.

Every year COMPASS works with hundreds of young people just like Taki. Using Cognitive Behavior Theory, we provide them with life-saving tools that help them become ready to succeed in education, employment, and life.

At COMPASS, we know that community-based violence intervention programs work. By advancing the initiatives outlined in these bills, you can help us build a community where our youth feel safe, live peacefully, and have the opportunity to reach their full potential.